

***FREGE'S CONCEPT OF THE THOUGHT: NECESSITY, ABSOLUTISM,
AND TRANSCENDENTAL ARGUMENTS***

by
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Frege's attempt to provide a foundation for the possibility of language and communication, like Kant's attempt to provide a foundation for the possibility of knowledge, fails to provide us with something absolute and foundational in a fixed sense. However, both these philosophers succeed in showing something about necessity that can be preserved independently of their absolutisms.

Part III of this paper will provide reasons for accepting this thesis, while Parts I and II will provide an expository background on Frege's view in preparation for supporting the thesis.

I. Overview: Frege's Ideas, Sense, and Thought

In his attempt to find a foundation for mathematics in logic, Frege was led to address central issues in the theory of knowledge and meaning. In this project he advanced a radically new theory of the proposition. Frege follows the Kantian priority of judgments over concepts as the basis of his logic of propositions and for him words have meaning only in the context of sentences.

Frege's views on eidetic structure and theory of the noun, of reference, definability, and well-made language remain classical. But where classical theory tried to understand the complexity of propositions by starting with a simple and uniform structure of the whole and then analyzing this into a very complex, intricate and functionally structured interior, Frege reversed this direction of analysis and saw the proposition, or "thoughts" (in his own terminology), as constructed from a few precise basic constituents. What is it to understand a language and a sentence? You must understand its parts.

Whereas classical theory had not clearly distinguished the judgment from the proposition or thought, Frege says thoughts (propositions) are independent of thinking. There would be no judgment without judging, but there are thoughts without thinking. Frege's introduction of the sense/reference distinction allows thoughts to be formed and expressed without being asserted. The function of the verb in classical theory as assertive is removed from the interior of the proposition and is replaced in Frege in the distinction of complete and incomplete, which solves the problem of embedded verbs and propositions.

We can "grasp" a sentence without knowing its truth-value and thereby keep knowledge of language and of the world separate. This is very classical. However, the move toward the current view that knowledge of language cannot be separated from other knowledge ironically begins in Frege with his radical reinterpretation of propositions.

In classical theory, the noun system is isomorphic with eidetic structure and definition makes translation possible. Frege preserves the notion of ideas and eidetic structure in the classical sense in his notion of sense. But he distinguishes the notions of judgment and proposition which was not clear in classical theory. Frege reserves the term "idea" for that which is purely subjective, and uses "sense" as the objective though not perceived reality that stands between the object and my idea of the object and makes knowledge and communication of knowledge of objects possible.

A thinker thinks or apprehends a thought but his own judgment or idea of it is not the thought itself. The realm of thoughts itself is not subjective but is the collective domain of all mankind and is their access to truth which makes language objectively meaningful and genuine communication possible.

In classical theory, ideas had this objective and independent existence, but propositions are not ideas. Frege's sense/reference distinction shows the difference and it is this difference between a sentence and its sense (a thought or proposition) and the reference or thing meant or referred to that allows objectivity and therefore communication. If thoughts were merely ideas, then all my thoughts would be only mine and yours only yours and communication would be impossible. For Frege, to be truly communicating about the world and not merely my subjective states, some objective independent existence, like thoughts, which genuinely connects language to the world of objects, must be presupposed.

II. Truth and Objectivity in Frege

Frege was concerned to combat the various forms of empiricism and the resulting subjectivism that seemed to make knowledge and communication incomprehensible. He sought an objective basis for knowledge and meaning. His notions of truth and thought play the central role in this.

The aim of logic is to discover truth, not truths; the mind, not minds, what is, not what happens. Its task is discovering the laws of truth, not of assertion or thought. Truth is not a relation, and thus not a correspondence. Nor is truth a property or quality. It is redundant to use the word "true" as a predicate in an assertion, since it is in the form of the declarative sentence that we assert truth. "The attempt to explain truth as correspondence collapses. And every other attempt to define truth collapses too. For in a definition certain characteristics would have to be stated. And in application to any particular case the question would always arise whether it were true that the characteristics were present. Consequently, it is probable that the content of the word "true" is unique and indefinable."¹

Like Kant, the notion of object is a formal one for Frege. But unlike Kant, sensibility is not necessary for knowledge of objects because thoughts are not spatio-temporal.² Frege is not willing to grant that objects can only be given in intuition, empirical or pure.

Sense impressions are part of the inner world. To have visual impressions is not to see things. They are necessary but not sufficient for sensory experience. Something non-sensible must be presupposed. The existence and nature of senses provide conditions for the knowledge of objects. But these conditions are not themselves objects of that knowledge.

Being true is not a material perceptible property as being blue. A truth-value is an object. To judge something as true is not a matter of perceiving and having an idea. In judging we pass from the thought to the truth-value. Without the thought or sense we could never arrive at truth but remain only in our own

¹G. Frege, "The thought: A Logical Inquiry," *Mind*, Vol. LXV, No. 259 (July, 1956), p. 291.

²Frege gives a tentative definition of a thought as follows: "Without wishing to give a definition, I call a thought something for which the question of truth arises. So I ascribe what is false to a thought just as much as what is true. So I can say: the thought is the sense of the sentence without wishing to say as well that the sense of every sentence is a thought. The Thought, in itself immaterial, clothes itself in the material garment of a sentence and thereby becomes comprehensible to us. We say a sentence expresses a thought." (Ibid. p. 292.)

subjectivity. Subject and predicate are elements of thought that when brought together can reach a thought but never go from sense to reference, never from thought to its truth-value. A thought is the sense of a sentence not its reference.

If the sense of a sentence were an idea only it would have no objectivity. Logic is concerned with what is true, or the true, not merely what I think or what I think is true. So sense must in some way be independent of me. A sentence expresses a sense but does not itself assert. Only a sense asserts and has or is the bearer of truth value.

The question of truth of sentences is really one of truth of the sense of a sentence, a thought. Thoughts can be true or false. A thought cannot be an idea. An idea is always mind dependent. If thoughts were ideas this would make truth purely subjective and therefore, (from the point of view of an objective truth), nonsense. The truth of the Pythagorean theorem is not contingent upon the thinker thinking that thought. Thoughts belong neither to my inner world as an idea nor to the outer world of material perceptible things. "One sees a thing, one has an idea, one apprehends or thinks a thought."³ Thoughts are the intermediary that link our ideas to the true.

"Only a sentence supplemented by a time-indication and complete in every respect expresses a thought."⁴ Truth is timeless. The "is" of true predication, i.e., in a thought, is a tense of timelessness. Thoughts are timeless but by apprehending a thought I come into a relation to it and it to me. So in my apprehending the thought it takes on a relation to the temporal in my thinking. But this is an inessential property of thoughts. The thought can, by my subjective apprehension, lead to action on my part and therefore consequences in the world. Thoughts can be communicated. How is this possible? By bringing about changes in the observable intersubjective realm of objectivity. When a thought is apprehended it at first only brings about changes in the inner world of an apprehender but the thought itself undergoes no change to its essential properties. Thoughts are real and have real effects but they are real in a different way than things.

Truth is discovered and not invented. Likewise, thoughts are not created by the thinker, but are independent and only apprehended as they are. Their truth is independent of being apprehended.

It is this independence that makes intersubjective communication possible. Without it each of us would have only our own inner ideas and impressions and no basis of intersubjective communication. Senses make communication possible. Thoughts are the senses of sentences. They make meaningfulness of sentences possible.⁵ "For all the multiplicity of languages, mankind has a common store of thoughts."⁶ The thought is the same for all thinkers, though the linguistic formulation and expression of a thought is

³Ibid. p. 302 (fn).

⁴Ibid. p. 309.

⁵"The thought, accordingly, cannot be the reference of the sentence, but must rather be considered as the sense." G. Frege, "On Sense and Reference," in *Translations From The Philosophical Writings Of Gottlob Frege*, 2nd edition, ed. by Max Black & Peter Geach (Oxford: Blackwell, 1960), p. 59.

⁶Ibid. p. 59.

subjective and imperfect and so does not adequately mirror the thought. Only an ideal language can do this where the perfect linguistic structure could give the perfect structure of the thought.

A genuine sentence could be understood in isolation from linguistic context. It will always give a time determination and will mirror the structure of its thought. For Frege all ordinary sentences that do not mirror the structure of their thought can be traced back to genuine sentences that do. His rules for definition assure this because they keep sense and reference clearly distinguished. For Frege every sign in a genuine sentence will always have a sense and a reference. All definition is explicit.

In "On Sense and Reference" Frege asks why we are not satisfied with the thought? The answer he says is because the striving for truth drives us from sense to reference. We are fundamentally interested in objective truth.

That which is objective is intersubjectively graspable but does not exist in the way actual things exist. Truth and thought must be objective, but we can't know the true in itself nor the relation of the true to thoughts. Without them, however, knowledge and communication are impossible. Though Frege argues that thoughts provide access to the true and make knowledge and communication possible, there is no way we can describe and know this relation. Truth is only realized for us in judgment and assertion.

The answer to the question of how communication is possible then, is that there must be thoughts and they must be objective, mind independent, universal, eternal, and perfect. Because thoughts are perfect and complete this allows the transcendental movement to perfect language. Perfect language reflects the structure of thought and thought is the path to truth.

The laws of logic facilitate clearing up the logical blemishes of language. They move us toward a language which can mirror the structure of thoughts which are perfect and timeless and are the bearers of the true. The true is singular, simple and without structure, unique and indefinable. "Logical laws are true in virtue of the logical terms occurring in them and the meaning of those terms is explicated with reference to the notions of truth and falsity...The notion of truth seems necessary for the design of a logically perfect language. Once the terms of that language have their meaning and the language is properly set up, no explicit reference to truth and falsity will be necessary any longer."⁷

So our pursuit of truth is facilitated by a logic which aims at a perfect language. This language and logic require a notion of what they are aiming at for their design. Once we have achieved this clarity, no explicit reference is needed, for language would "wear truth on its sleeve."

III. Conclusion

Frege may be seen in the tradition of Kant as providing for language and the possibility of meaning and communication what Kant did for the possibility of knowledge of objects. Just as Kant had shown that judgment and the conditions of thought and experience of objects are the same for all human consciousness, thought and truth are the same for all men, for all languages, for all time, and makes communication of knowledge of objects in language possible.

⁷Hans Sluga, *Gottlob Frege* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), p. 117.

Russell's contradiction undermined Frege's logicism and his notion of logical objects. But within the context of Frege's philosophy and seeing it as a response to the problems of classical theories of language and meaning, his use of the notion of propositions or thoughts as independent, objective and universal is very cogent and impressive.

Freed from the context of providing a foundation for mathematics and his critique of classical theories of meaning, and seen only in the context of the historical pursuit of certainty, his view of truth and thought seems to lose its appeal, unless perhaps there is a hidden appeal to another level of transcendental argument here.

If truth and meaning as Frege envisioned them were possible then certain conditions must be presupposed, most centrally some way of ascertaining and communicating them. His philosophy does provide this in the notion of thought. But the relation between thoughts and truth, and the way in which the mind has a relation to thoughts by "apprehending" is not clear.

The problem for Frege is that he needs his view of truth not merely to be not false, but rather necessarily true. The problem is begged in formulating it since the notion of truth and falsity in a context and what Frege calls the true and the false are very different conceptions which cannot be decided once and for all within the context of Frege's philosophy. His view of truth rules out the alternative.

Frege needs the very conception of truth he is assuming in order to make his view of truth and meaning work, and thereby support his underlying thesis that human knowledge has objective non-empirical foundations. This is not to say a philosopher of such great stature committed the fallacy of begging the question in his reasoning about truth, but that the conception is so primitive, as Frege says, unique and simple, that reasoning about it requires it.

Kant was a master of coping with this kind of problem. But that does not in itself make Kant's list of categories and his view of knowledge the right ones nor, in Frege's case, does the brilliance of his reassessment of the proposition and his attempt to preserve objectivity make his notion of truth successful. Perhaps the best one could say is that any system of knowledge and meaning will presuppose some set of categories, will presuppose some conception of truth and consistency that would make the system of knowledge or meaning possible in its own terms in order to achieve its aim. It seems the notion of self reference is the key to the process of justification in any transcendental arguments and is unavoidable. Kant and Frege were looking for these limits in terms of those very limits, a very difficult task.

One might argue against Kant and Frege, that no limit is absolute, but in their defense, that limits are absolutely necessary. Their philosophies have helped us see the latter much more clearly, if not also the former by the problems their philosophies encountered. Kant and Frege showed us that limits in the form of logical and transcendental requirements for thought, knowledge, and communication may well be absolutely necessary, but we now realize that no such limit is absolute.

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